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ABSTRACT

Minimum competency testing programs present educational decision makers with a new opportunity to reconsider some fundamental issues in American public education. First, what is the goal of our elementary and secondary educational system? In particular, one must consider the role that minimum competency testing plays in the struggle for equality of educational opportunity and quality educational opportunities for all students. A second issue raised by minimum competency testing is designating as "educated" a student who has successfully passed the required tests. The process of defining "education" on the basis of test performance is especially controversial when the testing mandate goes beyond the basic skills. Finally, the issue that must be examined in relation to minimum competency testing is that of who the decision makers are that will answer the first two questions. These individuals must be accountable to legislators and to the public. In addition, they must be able to evaluate the actual educational processes involved in the measurement of minimum competencies. In sum, it is important that both decision makers and educational observers realize that what happens with minimum competency testing will have an impact on the definition and goals of American public education. (Author/GC)

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MINIMUM COMPETENCY TESTING: NEW DIRECTIONS FOR AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION?

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Minimum competency testing is being implemented in a majority of states and in many local school districts.[1] These programs, whether self-implemented or mandated by a state board of education, state commissioner or state legislature, are of varied character. Some minimum competency testing programs are used to determine initial entry into public education. Some minimum competency testing programs are used to determine class placement, ability grouping, or tracking. Some programs are used to determine grade-to-grade promotion. Finally, some programs are used to determine high school graduation and whether test-takers are to receive regular high school diplomas or some less desirable credential of high school completion.

The varied character of minimum competency testing programs is also exhibited by the varying nature of the test and evaluation instruments used in such programs; some minimum competency testing relies upon the use of traditional norm-referenced test instruments, while other programs rely upon criterion-referenced testing. Despite the widespread variety of minimum competency testing programs, all such programs present common questions about the nature of American public education.

Minimum competency testing programs present both educational decision-makers and observers of the American educational scene with a new opportunity to reconsider the most fundamental issues in American

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[1]Pipho, Chris. "State Activity: Minimum Competency Testing, Update VIII" (July 1, 1979). Denver, Colorado: Education Commission of the States.

public education:

> What is the goal of our system of public elementary and secondary education?
>
> What is the implication of designating the student-products of our educational system "educated"?
>
> Who are the decision-makers who answer these questions?

The answers to these questions are best sought by looking first for the identities of the decision-makers who have brought us minimum competency testing. It is these actors who shape the nature of the remaining inquiries.

Minimum Competency Testing: Who Decides?

The individuals and organizations determining questions related to the use of minimum competency testing are slightly less varied and diverse than the nature of the testing programs they consider. Whether to initiate minimum competency testing, how to implement the program, definition of the goals and objectives to be tested, determination of the use of test results--all of these and myriad related issues--are determined by one or more of five categories of decisionmakers. The nature and scope of minimum competency testing has been determined by state legislators, state departments or commissioners of education, state boards of education, local boards of education, or local school administrators. One or the other of these actors has played the major role in decision-making relative to the use of minimum competency testing in a jurisdiction, with only occasional cooperative efforts by two or more categories of decision-makers.

The three case studies presented to this conference highlight three disparate examples of such decision-making. Commissioner Mallory describes Missouri's testing initiative, undertaken at the direction of the State Board of Education. Superintendent Thompson describes Wisconsin's system of assessment of education, a system implemented in response to a legislative mandate linked to a statute which increased state funding for education. Superintendent Caruso describes Chicago's locally-initiated testing program.

The decision-makers active in making critical choices about minimum competency testing impact the new testing programs in different ways, ways most often dictated by the unique constituency to whom the decision-makers feel that they themselves are accountable. The Wisconsin legislature must, for example, have felt to some extent accountable to the taxpayers who would demand proof of the need and effectiveness of the increased state financial support for public elementary and secondary education. Some local boards of education initiate competency tests as high school graduation requirements in direct response to pressure from local business leaders who complain that they can no longer rely upon high school diplomas as proof that prospective employees can read and compute with sufficient proficiency for on-the-job success. Some educator decision-makers choose to implement minimum competency testing in anticipation of increased aggregate student scores on the standardized measures of achievement used to evaluate and compare educational programs. These educators frequently are advocates of a "carrot and stick" approach to learning or, for that matter, to teaching, and believe that a test-to-learn approach will increase student proficiency.

The audience to whom the decision-makers feel accountable will determine the nature, and indeed the very existence, of the testing program. In fact, the voice of the audience to whom the decision-maker feels accountable may be so strong that the constituency may become, de facto, the unofficial decision-maker for much important educational policy-making. This is particularly true when the decision-maker is publicly elected. In some circumstances, the demand of the unofficial decision-makers has become so strong that the official, professional decision-makers--many times experienced educators--have felt compelled to engage in practices contrary to their own best judgment and training. Such situations have caused the use of new test instruments before they have met requisite professional standards for validity and reliability because of a demand for immediate implementation of a testing program. Similarly, many educators have been pressed to test and make critical decisions about students before sufficient proof was gathered of "instructional match," i.e., that students were being fairly instructed on the knowledge and skills assessed by the test.

The problem of instructional match, or instructional validity, is a critical variable influenced by the locus of decision-making about minimum competency testing. If the prime movers of a testing program operate at the state level, either in a legislature, a state board or a state department, the testing program will have a significantly different educational effect than would a locally-initiated program. Because a mandated minimum competency test will, at least eventually, have a

powerful influence on the curriculum afforded students who will be required to take the test, a state-run testing program removes from local school districts the last and most significant vestige of local control, the determination of what will be taught to a community's school children.

Minimum Competency Testing: Who is "Educated"?

Regardless of where the decision-making about minimum competency testing takes place and the identity of the official or unofficial decision-makers, the goals and objectives measured on the test play a major role in defining what we mean when we say that a student has been successfully "educated." Educational end-products are labeled as being successfully educated if they pass the test, regardless of whether the test is part of a test-for-diploma scheme, where the achievement measured is successful completion of twelve years of study, or whether the test is part of a school readiness scheme, where the achievement measured is the success of the family in early childhood education. Some programs define successful education in smaller increments, use a minimum competency test to measure the achievement needed to pass from grade-to-grade or from track-to-track within a grade. In each instance, when the skills and knowledge to be measured on the test are defined and when the requisite level of achievement for success on the test is set through designation of item difficulty and cut-score, the test-makers establish a standard of education.

The process of identifying those who have been successfully educated begins when the testing program is initially mandated. The decision-makers

establishing the program, be they legislators, board members, or educators, generally provide at least a general statement of the purposes of the testing program. Thus, minimum competency testing programs are initiated "to combat the ills of social promotion," "to assess the ability to function in the adult real world," or "to insure proficiency in the basic skills and to promote good citizenship." This charge to the test-makers begins the process of defining the educated individual. The definition is further substantial when the test-makers establish the goals and objectives, or skills and knowledge, which will be assessed in determining whether the overriding mandate is being met by a particular student. Some programs have relied upon extensive public input at this stage; in other programs public input has been minimal or nonexistent. Some programs have looked closely to the unofficial decision-makers for formal input at this state; others have not. In any event, when test content is defined, a simultaneous and congruent definition is implicitly written for what is required for a student to be identified as having been successfully educated.

This process of defining education causes little controversy when only the most fundamental and basic of skills in reading, writing, and computation are at issue. However, once the testing mandate goes beyond proficiency in the basic skills, controvery abounds. Programs to assess "functional literacy," "adult basic competency," or "fundamental survival skills" provoke unending debate about what public education is and should be doing. At time, the debate concerns the ambiguity of those terms. However, once the test-makers sharpen the definitions of those terms by

articulating the skills and knowledge which they feel are components of each construct, an unending debate is provoked. Too often, the test mandate and the test-makers seek to measure that which is subjective, infringes on privacy, contains value judgments, conflicts with religious beliefs, or imposes certain political perspectives.

While American public education has long been recognized as one of the most powerful mechanisms for socialization and assimilation in this nation, in a society with somewhat increasing tolerance for individual differences educational mandates which act to impose religious, political, or value perspectives face almost certain opposition from at least some segments of society. Thus, current objections to racial and cultural bias in some tests can be expected to grow, along with complaints about such efforts as tests of "moral development" and of "good citizenship."

The substance of knowledge tested is one controversy provoked by attempts to define education by tests, the level of knowledge tested is another. While this issue is not as public as the one just described, if made public, the controversy over levels of skill required would be only slightly less intense. What would be the public reaction to its realization that many tests used to determine high school graduation require only the proficiency of the average sixth or seventh grader? And, controversy aside, what are we conceding about our educational system when we seek after twelve or thirteen years of schooling, only six or seven years of educational achievement? The latter question presents particularly discouraging prospects when one realizes that minimum competency testing will, in all probability, drive the curriculum and

instruction in our schools in such a way that, with little else to offer as incentives for teachers or students, the minimums on the competency test become the maximum level of curriculum and instruction offered in most schools.

Minimum Competency Testing: What Are the Goals of Public Education?

The struggle over control of the minimum competency movement and the difficulty of agreeing on what the movement should tell us about our students both point to the most fundamental question the movement requires us to assess. Does the minimum competency testing movement require us to reassess the goals of our system of public elementary and secondary education and, if so, what should these goals be?

In particular, one is inclined to consider what role minimum competency testing plays in the struggle for equality of educational opportunities for minority students and the struggle for quality educational opportunities for all students. Will the minimum competency movement foster or inhibit the pursuit of either goal? Is either concern either a present or contemplated goal of our educational system and, if so, will minimum competency testing serve to further or to frustrate that goal?

To date, the only impact minimum competency testing has had on equality of educational opportunity has been the confirmation, by the test results, that we have not yet achieved equality of educational opportunity for students of all races and cultures. In fact, the tests

confirm that we have far to go in our efforts.[2] No minimum competency testing program has as yet shown anything other than significantly lower educational achievement for minority students. The data shows achievement so low that it cannot be primarily attributable to the family socioeconomic background of the student. In fact, analysis of test scores and other student data indicate that race was a far more potent prediction of student success on one major minimum competency test than other variables, including socioeconomic status.[3]

Efforts to explain away low minority test performance on grounds that test results are being used primarily to identify students in need of remedial or compensatory educational opportunities must be carefully scrutinized. When the use of a minimum competency test has the effect of segregating or resegregating students on the basis of race, are we able to sufficiently justify, for both educational and social reasons, the practice? Further, is such isolation of the races justifiable when we have no proof that any increase in test scores which might result is not the result of teaching test taking skills rather than increased proficiency in the fundamental skills being measured on the test?

The quality of educational opportunities afforded our students is another factor presented in relating the goals of education to the issues presented by minimum competency testing. Implicit in competency

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[2] In spring, 1979, the first graduating class subjected to a state test-for-diploma requirement under Florida's Educational Accountability Act provided graphic evidence of the racial effects of minimum competency testing: black students had a ten times greater chance of failing the test than whites.

[3] O'Hare, William. "Race, Socioeconomic Status, and Competency Testing," NSSLP Report, January, 1980. Washington, D.C.: National Social Science and the Law Project.

testing s definitions of what will be taught and at which levels of proficiency, is the establishment of the goals toward which our teachers and students will be working and the quality of education which students will be afforded. Few of us realize, when we become involved in issues relating to minimum competency testing, that we are making determinations which directly effect what education will be and how far education will take our students.

The quality of educational opportunities we afford our students is also effected by the pressures to which we respond when we implement testing programs. For example, to respond to the demand to make the high school diploma a certificate for certain employers will significantly influence not only the meaning of the diploma but also the instructional offering in most schools.

Finally, some of us, myself included, have at various times posited an individualized approach to minimum competency testing as a proposed solution or alternative to the present minimum competency testing conundrum. The formulation of an individualized educational program for every student, based upon that student's needs, abilities, and goals with the use of an individually-tailored assessment of competency to determine whether the student has met his or her individual educational goals, is alluring and should receive further consideration. However, individualized education of this type presents only a facile solution to the problems presented by the minimum competency testing movement. The forces behind minimum competency testing seek a mechanism for

fostering individual educational achievement, but they also seek such goals as re-establishing the "credibility" of the high school diploma. An employer who seeks assurance that a high school diploma signifies a specified level of achievement can hardly be expected to be satisfied with what are, in effect, individualized diplomas. Legislators, seeking a specified "rate of return" on the investment of educational tax dollars, would also probably have difficulty accepting the individualized approach.

Minimum Competency Testing: Where Will It Take Us?

More questions than answers about the impact of minimum competency test have been presented here. Such is as it should be, at least at this point in the history of the movement. We cannot yet fully assess this latest educational innovation but we can, and must, in our roles as educational decision-makers or simply educational observers, remember that what happens with minimum competency testing will impact the definition and goals of education in our nation.